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THE GERMAN ARDENNES COUNTER OFFENSIVE 16 DECEMBER 1944 TO
2 JANUARY 1945 (ARDENNES-ALSACE CAMPAIGN)

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THE GERMAN ARDENNES COUNTEROFFENSIVE

16 DECEMBER 1944-2 JANUARY 1945

INTRODUCTION

On 6 June 1944 the Allied Armies under the command of General Dwight D. Eisenhower came over the beaches of Normandy, embarked upon the invasion of the continent to bring to a successful conclusion the war in Europe by destruction of the German field forces in the west.

Seven weeks later they had captured the port of Cherbourg, cleared the Cotentin peninsula of enemy forces and were disposed generally across the base of the peninsula, a distance of approximately 60 miles.

Breaking out of the narrow confines of the Cotentin, they swept eastward and northward through France and Belgium, closely pursuing the defeated German Armies. By 12 September 1944 they were disposed generally along the Maginot line in the south and the West Wall in the north, extended from Switzerland to the North Sea.

Deeming it advisable to continue carrying the war to the enemy in spite of shortages of men and supplies, the Allies had by a series of offensives succeeded in closing up to the German frontier, and had penetrated the West Wall in two areas, near Aachen on the north and the Saar in the south.

The Germans were fighting on three fronts: the Eastern, or Russian, the Southern, or Italian and the Western Front. Severely defeated in France the preceeding summer, losing ground steadily on the Russian and Italian fronts, they were hard pressed to meet the demands upon their manpower and supplies. Their total defeat seemed imminent.

Suddenly, on 16 December 1944 four German Armies emerged from the shelter of the West Wall to launch an offensive which was to cause the First U. S. Army to reel back in confusion and disorder; and to force the Allies to concentrate the major elements of three additional armies to limit the penetration and restore the lines.

The events of the preceding summer had forced upon the Allied High Command certain decisions, which in the process of execution, set the stage across which the once mighty Nazi war machine was to launch its last great offensive in World War II. It is necessary, therefore, in order to properly present the background, to review to some extent, those events. It is also of value to examine the German plans and preparations which enabled them to regain for a short period, the initiative they lost when the Allies invaded the continent. (See Map A)

ALLIED SITUATION

By mid-September 1944 the Allied drive through Northern France had come to a halt as the tanks, out of gasoline, sputtered to a stop against the German West Wall. The enormity of the success had caught the Allied High Command unprepared for full exploitation. Supply lines had been extended to a point where proper support of front line units was impossible. Cherbourg was the only major port available to the Allies and extensive damage to the docking facilities and skillful use of the acoustic mine by the Germans precluded its fullest use. The bulk of the supplies was still being brought over the beaches of Normandy. Once ashore the difficulties of transporting them 375 miles to the frontline divisions were enormous. Added to the German destruction of rail equipment and highway bridges was that inflicted by the Allied Air Force in its strategy of battlefield isolation. In the face of these difficulties SCHAEFF must, to successfully prosecute the war, supply its armies during reorganization and accumulate sufficient supplies and materiel to support future offensives. (1)

The Allied High Command was faced also with the decision of how best to penetrate the heart of Germany and bring to a successful conclusion the invasion of the continent. Two possible routes of advance were offered, and as usual in such cases two schools of thought existed as to the best approach. Field Marshall Montgomery,

the commander of the 21st (Br.) Army Group, supported by other elements of the British High Command and British public opinion urged the utilization of the approach offered by the North German plains as the shortest and most logical route since its terrain favored the tactical use of armor. On the other hand, General Omar Bradley, commander of the 12th Army Group (U. S.) ably supported by General Patton, commander of the Third U. S. Army favored the advantages offered by the Frankfort Gap. In as much as the northern route would be largely a British effort and the Frankfort Gap would be largely U. S. much pressure was brought to bear upon the Supreme Commander by both protagonists. General Eisenhower arrived at a decision which included both proposals. He would close up to the Rhine with all armies and endeavor to destroy the bulk of the German forces west of the Rhine. There he would halt, regroup, and resupply and proceed to invade the heart of Germany by the northern route. (2)

Whether or not the decision was wise will be a matter of debate for decades. It did, however, present many difficulties. In order to put the decision into effect it was necessary to carry on offensives along a large part of a 625 mile front. Adequate defenses had to be established over the remainder. Supplies must be accumulated to support the offensives. Reinforcements must be provided to maintain the strength of the front line divisions. New divisions must be brought over from the United States in order to man adequately the long tortuous 625 mile front now held by the Allies.

Accordingly, SCHAEF ordered the Commander of the 21st Army Group to clear the Scheldt estuary of German forces to make the port of Antwerp, one of the largest ports in Europe, available to the Allies. Here a mass of highways and railroads branched out to the east, north and south providing adequate means of transportation

once the supplies were ashore. By 3 November Field Marshall Montgomery had cleared the area and by the latter part of November the port was in full operation. (3)

The reinforcement problem was not so easily solved, however. The demands upon manpower as the Allied units were disposed along the West Wall were enormous. Prior to the breakthrough at St. Lo the line of defense extended from Lessay on the west coast of the Cotentin peninsula, in Normandy, roughly eastward through St. Lo and Caen thence to the English Channel. The sector occupied by the First U. S. Army was approximately 40 miles in length. Its sector on 15 December 1944 extended northward from the vicinity of Remich, south and east of Luxembourg to Grosbeek on the Meuse River north of Maas-tricht, a distance of approximately 155 miles. The southern portion of the sector traversed the Ardennes Forest area generally along the German border. Eastward of this line lay the Eifel area, the extension of the Ardennes topography into the Rhineland. In ages past a mountain range ^{was} as high as the present day Alps, ^{but} centuries of erosion had reduced it to an area of gently rolling to high pointed hills interspersed with narrow valleys. Numerous primary roads follow the valleys, secondary roads are almost nonexistent. It is ideally suited to defense. It is poorly adapted to offensive operations. (4)

not an enemy

The northern sector of the First Army offered better opportunities for offense. As a result of an offensive launched on 2 October 1944 Aachen fell on the 21st. Immediately plans were made for regrouping ^{and} resupply for a further offensive to gain the Roer River and Duren. Once these objectives were gained the approach across the plains to the Cologne-Bonn area on the Rhine was over terrain favorable to armor. Limited offensives ^{by the allies} were carried on prior to the ^{offensive} which opened on 16 November. Gains were not substantial, due to bad weather and the stubborn defense of the German troops. Casualties were extremely heavy.

(3) B p57 (4) C-Situation Map #4; I Map #20

It now became apparent that a crossing of the Roer River below Duren was impractical since the dams on the upper reaches of the Roer and on the Urft River, its tributary, remained in German hands. Efforts to destroy them by air had failed. Should the First Army effect a crossing below these dams the Germans could by flooding the Roer Valley isolate the troops on the east bank leaving them to the mercy of the German Sixth Panzer Army laying in wait for the Roer crossing, on the plains in front of Cologne. (5)

Accordingly, General Bradley directed that the dams be seized by an attack northeastward from the vicinity of Monschau toward Schmidt. This attack by the 99th, 2nd, 78th and 8th Infantry Divisions with CCB of 9th Armored was launched on the morning of the 13 December 1944 and was continuing with slow progress when the German attack came on 16 December 1944.

Through October and November a total of 17 divisions were used by the First and Ninth U. S. Armies in the Aachen Sector. Defense was stubborn and losses were heavy. Battle mauled divisions were withdrawn and placed in the defensive positions in the Ardennes to relieve divisions for commitment in the Aachen salient. (6)

Elsewhere in the Allied front, in order to carry out the Supreme Commander's plans to close to the Rhine, various offensives were being launched. The operation to open the port of Antwerp had been delayed to free troops for a combined land and airborne operation in an attempt to secure bridgeheads over the lower Rhine beyond the West Wall. Though severe losses were sustained, the offensive fell short of its objective and resulted only in securing bridgeheads over the Maas and Waal. It also served to bring the British Second and Canadian First Armies generally on a line with the 12th Army Group to the south. (7)

South of the Ardennes the Third U. S. Army had reduced Metz and bypassed its surrounding fortresses, which were reduced by 13 December, and advanced to the Saar River and made contact with the West

(5) B p-60 C p-97 (6) B p-60 (7) A p-39 B p-56

Wall over a 16 mile area. There it halted for regrouping and resupply and prepared for an attack which was scheduled to jump off in 19 December. (8)

On the Third Army's right flank the 6th Army Group composed of the Seventh U. S. and French First Armies, by a series of attacks through the month of November, succeeded in gaining the upper reaches of the Rhine at Strasbourg.

These offensives encountered severe resistance and the cost in men and supplies was heavy. As the intensity of the fighting increased the manpower problem increased to plague the Allied High Command. Britain, her human resources impoverished by five years of war, of which three years were a series of bitter defeats, had long since scraped the bottom of its manpower barrel. France had yet to recuperate from four years of occupation by the Germans.

The only remaining source was the United States. (8)

Early in October General George Marshall, U. S. Chief of Staff, visited the Allied Armies in the Western Front. He discovered that many divisions had been in almost constant combat since the Normandy landing and consequently ordered shipped immediately the regiments of 9 of 11 infantry divisions still in training in the States. Committed to a global war, the United States, while wealthy in manpower resources was having difficulty meeting the requirements of properly trained divisions and reinforcements necessary to the global effort. (8)

Calculated risks are inherent in all military operations. This was no exception. If offensives were to be mounted sufficient troops must be provided to mount them. This then necessitated heavy concentrations in certain vital areas. Since available divisions were insufficient to defend properly the entire Western Front, some areas must then be thinly held.

The area chosen was the Ardennes. (It was an area well suited to defense and poorly suited to offense. No objectives of impor-

tance were located in rear of the lines within reasonable striking distance of the Germans. True, the Germans had attacked through the region in 1914 and again in 1940, but things were different then. In both instances the German war machine was at the height of its efficiency. But now it had been badly defeated the preceeding summer in France. It was not likely to risk its slender resources in an area where the prospect of decisive gain offered so little hope. (9)

Meanwhile the First Army continued to use the Ardennes sector as a rest area for its battle weary divisions, also to provide newly arrived units further training in contact with the enemy in a quiet sector. (10)

On 13 December 1944 the First Army was composed of three Corps: the VII Corps on the north, adjacent to the Ninth U. S. Army, the V Corps was in the center, while on the south over the Ardennes area was VIII Corps commanded by Major General Troy H. Middleton. VIII Corps had come under First Army control on 22 October 1944 when the Ninth U. S. Army which had for a short period operated in the southern part of the Ardennes following its release from the Brittany peninsula, moved north adjacent to First Army's left flank. Originally composed of three infantry divisions, the 4th, 8th and 83rd, there had been a constant change in its order of battle as battle scarred divisions replaced those in the line, while the replaced divisions went north to partake in the offensives being mounted in the Aachen sector. On 30 September ^{1st} 2nd Division replaced the 4th while the 4th moved northward to be badly mauled in the Hurtgen forest. On the 14 November the 28th Division after severe losses in the fighting in the Hurtgen area relieved the 8th Division in the center of the VIII Corps sector, while the 8th went northward to participate in the fighting southeast of Aachen. On 12 December the 4th Division was removed from the line after heavy casualties and replaced the 83rd Division on the south flank of the Corps sector.

(9) A p-44 B p-62 (10) F p-78

The 83rd moved northward to take over the area formerly held by the 4th. On the north flank lay the 2nd Division. On 10 December the 106th Infantry Division relieved the 2nd while the second moved northward to participate in the attack on Schmidt. The 14th Cavalry Group was attached to the 106th and placed on its left flank. It filled a small gap in the line, and being mobile could maintain contact with the attacking 99th Division on its left. (11)

The demand for additional divisions in the offensives in the Aachen area was so great that the 106th Division was brought over from England ahead of schedule. Landing on the continent early in December it had been transported by trucks to its positions facing the West Wall in bitter freezing weather. Untried in battle, not acclimated to the severity of an Ardennes winter it was ill prepared for the blow it was to receive less than a week later. (12)

In mid-October the 9th Armored Division was assigned to VIII Corps to provide a reserve for the defense. Its three combat commands were spread over the 80 mile sector. On 12 December Combat Command Baker of the division moved northward to provide a reserve and an exploitation force for the offensive being launched toward the Roer River dams on 13 December. On 10 December CCA had gone in to the line on the 28th Division's right flank. (13)

The defense in the area consisted of a series of strong points with great gaps in between them. Troops were spread too thin to provide sufficient depth. Nor could the one combat command of the 9th Armored Division be considered sufficient reserve over so large an area. Moreover, in a letter of instructions issued by First Army on 6 December 1944 VIII Corps was "to continue its previous mission of conducting aggressive defense within the Corps Zone and be prepared to advance on Koblenz on Army order". Offense was the keynote of the Allied policy and defense was organized only to implement that policy. (14)

Thus we find that in the area where the Nazi war machine was

(11) C p-78,88,97 (12) F p-77 (13) C p-98 (14) C p-88 F p-79

Corps (Hwy)
to strike on the morning of 16 December 1944 the following order of battle. On the north, in the V Corps sector the 99th and 2nd Infantry Divisions attacking toward the Roer River dams. On the north flank of the VIII Corps sector filling a small gap lay the 14 Cavalry Group, attached to the 106th Infantry Division which was responsible for the Corps' left flank. In the center was the 28th Infantry Division with CCA, 9th Armored Division, while on the south flank the line was occupied by the 4th Infantry Division. One combat command of the 9th Armored Division provided the reserve. Three infantry divisions, one armored division, and a reconnaissance unit defended a line of approximately 80 miles in length. Of the divisions two were recuperating from recent severe losses in the Hurtgen Forest. The third was receiving its battle indoctrination. The reserve lacked battle experience. (15)

Thus the stage was set.

THE GERMAN PLANS AND PREPARATIONS

Behind the West Wall during the critical fall months of 1944 the German High Command also had its problems. Severely defeated in France during the preceeding summer months they had, however, salvaged more than was then realized by the Allied High Command. Fighting cores of divisions and armies were in most instances retained. The fact that the German Command avoided a major battle after the Falaise Gap indicates a planned withdrawal. The Seventh, Fifteenth and Fifth Panzer Armies by a series of covering actions succeeded in reaching the shelter of the West Wall, the Fifteenth in the north facing the British, the Seventh barring the approach to Cologne, the Fifth Panzer further south joining with the First and Nineteenth Armies. (16)

True, the Allied pursuit had moved too fast to permit the German Armies to form on one of the many possible defense lines short of the West Wall. But the Allied supply lines, stretched almost to the breaking point slowed the pace of the advancing armies and provided the Germans much needed time.

(15) O p-97 (16) G p-51

September and October were months of extreme activity in reorganization. Drastic measures were needed and drastic measures were taken.

An intensive comb-out of German manpower produced an estimated 230,000 men for the defense of the West Wall. Of these 100,000 were used to form fresh divisions, the Volks Grenadiers, 50,000 were used as replacements in battle depleted divisions, 20,000 were formed into GHQ Troops while 50,000 were members of fortress battalions with some previous training. Many were "ersatz" infantrymen, air force and naval personnel given a few days infantry training and assigned to combat units. (17)

The fortress battalions, 70 in all proved a valuable asset. Taken over by the Headquarters of divisions badly mauled in the fighting in France they formed the core of the West Wall defense during the critical period. Remnants of the divisions were then sent to the rear for reorganization and resupply. Fighting from the well prepared positions they were able to ward off the Allied attacks, thus enabling the Germans to take their depleted Panzer Divisions from the line for reorganization and refitting. (17)

By proclamation all able bodied males from 15-60 years of age, in the area between the West Wall and the Rhine, were made available to the army to work on the fortifications. By the opening days of October order had been brought out of the chaos in the Rhineland. Faced at last with the defense of the sacred soil of their homeland the German people had responded to Herr Hitler's cry "Defend to the last man and the last round". (17)

The problem of regaining the initiative lost with the Allied landings in Normandy was Herr Hitler's greatest concern. Severely injured by the bomb in the attempt on his life on 20 July 1944 and confined to his bed he devoted his time primarily to the military situation. Obsessed with the idea of attack, Hitler, in early September, informed Field Marshall Wilhelm Keitel, Chief of Wermacht High Command and Colonel General Alfred Jodl, Chief of the Armed
(17) C p-57

Forces Operation Staff that the initiative was to be regained.

Since the decision had been made to counterattack, the problem remained to select the area. Analyzing the situation on the various fronts on which they were engaged, they arrived at the conclusion that the Western Front offered the best opportunity for decisive results. The Allied supply problem had yet to be solved. Moreover the Allies were still weak in man power. Redisposed along the West Wall after the narrow confines of the Normandy perimeter, the lines were thinly held. The Germans were well aware of this situation. Also Hitler's contempt for democracies led him to believe that their will to win was weak and that a severe defeat on the Western Front might possibly force them out of the war. (18)

It remained for Hitler himself to select the Ardennes sector for the attack. Learning that only four U. S. divisions defended the area he directed Jodl to submit a detailed plan at the earliest possible date. It was to be a thrust through the Ardennes across the Meuse thence to Antwerp. The port with its communication lines to the southeast toward Liege was to be seized, thereby throttling the British and U. S. divisions in the north. (18) (19) C-Map opp p-104 (See Map C)

In spite of the heavy Allied bombing raids the Germans had miraculously been able to increase their production in tanks, artillery and ammunition, chiefly by the expedient of moving their vital plants underground. Their greatest problem was fuel, but by reducing the allowances to other fronts a sufficient quantity was accumulated for the attack. They were weak in the air, and though the Luftwaffe was to concentrate all its available planes to support the attack it must be so timed that the massing of the troops immediately prior to the attack could be done in weather unfavorable to air reconnaissance. Also the first few days of the attack should have the benefit of weather unfavorable to the Allied Air Force, thus denying them the advantage of their air superiority. (18)

(18) F p-4-45 incl.

The wettest fall and winter in years proved of immeasurable assistance to the Germans particularly in the North where the flooded valleys of the Roer, Waal and Rhine Rivers enabled them to defend with fewer men than would have otherwise been possible. This enabled them to withdraw divisions for reorganization and refitting, and also to give their Volksgrenadier divisions battle indoctrination under favorable conditions. (20)

The Sixth Panzer Army was organized with remnants of panzer divisions withdrawn from the line. In mid-November it moved from its position deep in Germany to the plains in front of Cologne. There it served a dual purpose, to counterattack should the Allies succeed in crossing the Roer River and further, to confuse Allied Intelligence as to the role for which it was primarily intended, commitment in the coming attack. (21)

The Sixth Panzer Army was composed of two Panzer Corps, the I and II, with a total of 4 Panzer Divisions plus the 180 Panzer Brigade and elements of the 3rd Panzer Grenadier Division and 2 infantry divisions. The command was given to Joseph "Sepp" Dietrich, ranking Weissen SS Officer in Germany. A fanatic loyal Nazi, a fact to which he owed his assignment, he lacked the training and experience to command an army. (21) (22)

The preparation of the Fifth Panzer Army for its part in the attack was more of a problem. Moved northward in mid-September from positions facing the Third U. S. Army to the Aachen area it participated in the defense of that city. Withdrawing prior to its surrender, it became a screening force covering the entire area in front of the Ruhr industrial district. Here began the refitting process, but many of the divisions which were intended for inclusion in the force were committed elsewhere, first east of Aachen, then in Holland and again in the south, west of the Saar industrial area. (23)

During the latter part of November the Fifteenth Army moved
(20) A p-42 C p-68 (21) C p-83 (22) F p-20-23 (23) F p-25-26

south to relieve the Fifth Panzer which moved further south to Koblenz. Both armies now entered the final weeks of preparation. (24)

Surprise is an essential element in a successful attack. The Germans took elaborate precautions to preserve secrecy. Originally given the code name of "Wacht Am Rhein" in order to deceive Allied Intelligence in to believing the projected attack was defensive in character should it become known, it was later changed to a code name more in character "Herbstuebel" (Autumn Smoke). During the early stages of planning only Headquarters Staff Officers were aware of its true nature. Hitler's long standing mistrust of the high ranking Army officers was increased by the attempt on his life by a clique which included members of the General Staff Corps. Even Field Marshall Von Rundstedt and Model, Commander in Chief of the West and Commander of Army Group "B" respectively, were unaware of the projected plans until the latter part of October. As it became necessary that subordinate officers be informed they were forced to sign a pledge of secrecy under the penalty of being shot. Mention of the plans by normal means of communication was forbidden. Only officer couriers were to be trusted with necessary messages and plans. Even they could not fly west of the Rhine. (25)

Troop movements west of the Rhine in the build up were forbidden except at night. During daylight hours all tanks, artillery and bridging equipment were carefully hidden. (25)

The tentative date for the attack was set as 25 November. Late in October Field Marshalls Von Rundstedt and Model were informed, given the plans of the operation and ordered to study them thoroughly and submit their views and comments. (26)

Though worked out in minute detail the plan was essentially simple. The Fifth and Sixth Panzer Armies were to make the thrust, the Sixth on the north advancing with its right flank generally following the line Elsenborn and Spa and to cross the Meuse River at Huy and other points between Huy and Liege, thence to Antwerp.

(24) C p 83-84 (25) F p-37,42,43 (26) F p-27

The Fifth on the south was to advance with its left flank generally on the line Wiltz, Bastogne, St. Hubert, Celles and Dinant, force crossings of the Meuse at Dinant and Namur and thence to Brussels and Louvain. On the north flank the LXVII Corps of the Fifteenth Army was to enter the area of penetration on the right flank of the Sixth Panzer Army then swing north to the northern slopes of the Elsenborn Ridge generally on the line Mutzenich, Verviers, Spa and Liege and block off the area of heavy concentration of First U. S. Army divisions. On the south the Seventh Army was to perform the same function for the Fifth Panzer, forming on a line extending generally from Echternach, to Neufchateau to Givet on the Meuse, guarding against Patton's divisions further south. Infiltration parties were to seize Meuse River bridges in the vicinity of Huy. A parachute battalion was to be dropped in the vicinity of Eupen to block the main highway south to Monschau, to assist the blocking force. Once the Meuse was crossed the Fifteenth Army was to launch an attack toward Maastricht from the northeast. Diversionary attacks were planned toward Antwerp from the north and against the Seventh U. S. and First French Armies in the south. (27)

After a study of the plans Rundstedt and Model suggested that the attack be a double envelopment, the southern thrust to strike in the vicinity of Monschau and swing northward east of Liege. The northern pincer would attack north and east of Maastricht and drive up the Meuse River. The two pincers would join and destroy the First Army troops concentrated in the area for the drive on Cologne. Should this not be approved, they then recommended that the attack planned for the Fifteenth Army toward Maastricht be canceled and the troops to be committed there diverted to strengthen the Ardennes thrust. (28)

Hitler, backed by Keitel and Jodl, refused to consider the changes recommended. The possible reward was much less than in the original proposal. That the objectives of the Ardennes thrust might

(27) C 103,104 (28) F p-28,29

be beyond the capabilities of the resources available did not occur to the ex-corporal of World War I. The Ardennes attack would be carried out as planned, with Antwerp as the objective. Nothing short of that would satisfy Herr Hitler. (28)

Rundstedt, apparently feeling that the plan could never succeed, divorced himself from further effort other than supply administration relating to the attack. Model, however, whose command, Army Group "B", would bear the responsibility entered enthusiastically into the planning. A well trained and competent field commander, he was also a loyal Hitler supporter. General Der Panzer Truppen Von Manteufel, whose Fifth Panzer Army was to make the southern thrust was not so eager. Realizing that unless extreme good fortune was to favor the attack Antwerp was hopelessly out of reach, he accordingly made plans which were to take him only to the Meuse River. He would make further plans if the necessity arose. A competent field commander and a master of armored tactics his advance elements were to reach a point four miles from the Meuse where the river was visible in the distance. One can but speculate on what success might have been achieved with the resources provided for the northern thrust had Manteufel's competence been present. (28)

A total of twenty eight divisions were tentatively allotted. The Sixth Panzer, making the primary thrust was to receive the most generous allotment. Four SS Panzer divisions plus panzer elements equal to a fifth division, and two infantry divisions were subordinated to the Sixth for the opening attack. Manned in excess of its table of organization, 100% equipped it was well prepared for the jump off. Manteufel's Fifth Panzer Army did not fare so well. 60 to 80% equipped, his divisions were also understrength. Initially his army was composed of three panzer divisions and three Volks Grenadier divisions. (29)

Attached to the Sixth Panzer Army was the 150 Panzer Brigade. Using U. S. equipment, uniforms, weapons and insignia it was to
(28) F p 28-29 (29) F p-12

pass through the advance elements once St. Vith had been reached and move swiftly toward the Meuse River seizing supply installations on the way and creating havoc with rear communications. It was then to seize the Meuse River bridges. Known by the code name of "Grief" though it accomplished nothing tactically it was to have considerable psychological effect on the Allied forces. Road blocks were established as far west as Paris in an effort to block parties which were still in rear of the German leading units. (29)

Hitler's Generals were not yet ready on the tentative date of 25 November. Fighting in the Roer River area had made it impossible to withdraw some of the ear marked divisions in time for refitting. Hitler reluctantly consented to postponement to 10 December. When that date arrived he again agreed to a postponement to the 15 December since weather forecasts predicted that the weather conditions would be more favorable on that date. (30)

The Seventh Army, commanded by an artillery general, Brandenberger, was already in position holding that part of the line. The Fifth and Sixth Panzer Armies began closing in to assembly areas in the wooded terrain behind the West Wall. Extreme precautions were taken to preserve secrecy. On the evening of the 15 December they were moved to the final assembly areas from which they would jump off on the next morning. (31)

Facing the West Wall, the American troops were blissfully unaware of the impending blow. U. S. Army Intelligence had succeeded in gathering sufficient evidence to support the assumption of an impending attack. The buildup of the Sixth Panzer Army had been reported and the movement of the Fifth Panzer Army to Coblenz opposite the Ardennes was known as was the southward shift of the Fifteenth Army. Captured Germans reported that an attack was planned. Allied air reconnaissance reported a troop buildup in the Coblenz area in November. A German woman reported to VIII Corps on 14 December (29) C p-104 (30) F p-42 (31) F p-45 (32) C p-84

the presence of large quantities of bridging equipment in the same area, a sure indication of offensive plans. (32)

While possessing sufficient information, the interpretation of its true meaning was in error. The use of the code name "Wacht Am Rhein" led the German Army personnel to believe that the plans were defensive in character and this belief was transmitted to the Allied Intelligence officers by the captured PW's. In any event, while they realized the possibility of an attack they believed it would come in the Aachen sector, seeking at most to recapture the city as a Christmas gift to Der Fuehrer. The area in which the attack was made, and its enormity came as a complete surprise to the Allied High Command. (33)

THE ATTACK

The Schnee Eifel is a high, rugged and wooded ridge extending in a northeasterly direction from the vicinity Eleialf to Ormont, a distance of, roughly, ten miles. On the ridge lay two regiments of the 106th Division. The remaining regiment, the 424th lay just to the south, while in the north the 14th Cavalry Group held the line northward to maintain contact with the attacking 99th Division.

Either end of the Schnee Eifel offers routes of approach to the important rail and highway center of St. Vith. The north end offers an approach to the Elsenborn Ridge, vital to the attacking Germans, to provide roads and maneuver space and as an anchor point upon which to build the defense against interference from the north. (34)

At 0530 hours on the 16 December the Germans opened with a heavy artillery barrage all along the Ardennes from the vicinity of Mutzenich, north of Monschau in the V Corps sector to Echternach near the south flank of the VIII Corps. Directed at first on front line elements after two hours it was shifted to rear area installations. At 0700 hours Manteufel's LXVI Corps with two infantry divisions, one on each end of the Schnee Eifel started moving up through the Amer- (32) C p-84 (33) C 99-103 (34) C p 104-106

lean lines. At 0730 the attack further north by Dietrich's I SS Panzer Corps composed of the 1st and 12th SS Panzer Divisions began the attack, the 1st SS Panzer Division toward Bullingen, the 12th toward Monschau. North of Monschau the LXVII Corps executed a frontal attack against the attacking 2nd and 99th Divisions in an attempt to gain the northern slopes of Elsenborn Ridge. (34)

The 2nd and 99th U. S. Divisions, attacking toward the Roer River were not prepared for defense. Badly shaken they continued to hold through the 16th and on the afternoon of the 17th permitted their lines to be bent back to the southern slopes of Elsenborn Ridge. Here they were to hold until the threat was eliminated, and their line provided the base upon which the First Army was to build its defense to contain the Germans, and later to counter-attack. (34)

The 14th Cavalry Group had given way under pressure of the I SS Panzer Corps and the ridge extending from the Schnee Eifel to the Elsenborn was lost. By the evening of 17 December 1944 a gap of 9 miles existed. Through this gap the 1st SS Panzer Division poured enroute to Stavelot. (34)

The divisions encircling the Schnee Eifel joined at Schonberg by mid-morning of 17 December and were advancing on St. Vith. (35)

General Middleton, realizing the threat to St. Vith on the 16th had obtained release of GCB, 9th Armored Division from V Corps and assigned to it the defense of that vital rail and highway center. (35)

Farther to the south in the 28th Infantry Division zone Mantoufel's two Panzer Corps, the LVIII and XLVII, using both infantry and tanks in the initial assault had driven the division back three miles. On the 17th the attack carried to the ridge west of the Our River and cut the main north and south highway west of Marburg. (35)

In the zone of the 4th Infantry Division on the VIII Corps south flank the Seventh German Army struck early on the 16th. Lacking the mobility of the armies on the north Brandenberger could not

(34) C p104-106 (35) C p105-108

move so fast. The 4th U. S. Division with CGA, 7th Armored Division succeeded in falling back across the Sauer River, facing north. Though subjected to heavy attacks the line was maintained and was to later form the anchor upon which the Third U. S. Army was to group its forces for the counterattack. (35)

When word of the attack reached Generals Eisenhower and Bradley, they were in conference seeking a solution to the reinforcement problem. While not yet cognizant of the strength of the attack both were fully aware of the weakness of the defense in that area. General Eisenhower suggested to General Bradley that available armor be dispatched to the scene. Consequently the 10th Armored Division, waiting to participate in the offensive across the Saar River scheduled to open on 19 December was moved northward to reinforce the 4th Infantry Division. The 7th Armored Division in Ninth U. S. Army reserve was released to VIII Corps and dispatched to St. Vith, where it was to arrive on the afternoon of the 17th. (36)

The German paratroop drop in the vicinity of Eupen resulted in total tactical failure. Scheduled for the early hours of 16 December bad weather forced postponement until 2400 hours that day. Inexperienced in night drops the air force scattered the parachutists over a large area. Only a few hundred met at the rendezvous and they were ineffectual. The promised support failed to arrive and the men were rounded up by units of the First and Ninth U. S. Armies. (37)

The psychological effect was great, however. Allied troops in large numbers were diverted to hunting reported parachutists, while one combat command of the 3rd Armored Division was held in the vicinity of Eupen in antiairborne defense when it was urgently needed in the fight against the armored elements used in the attack.

By the evening of 17 December two gaps had been made through the American lines. The approach over the ridge north of the Schne Eifel, nine miles in width was open and the 1SS Panzer Division was moving through. The southern gap, in 28 Division sector was 10 to
(35) C pl05-108 (36)B p-62

12 miles wide and moving through it were moving three armored and two infantry divisions. (38)

The strength of the attack had become more apparent by midday on 17 December. It was evident that a major problem in containment faced the Allied forces. The only theatre reserve available to SCHAEFF were the two airborne divisions, the 82nd and 101st. In training areas near Rheims, France, recuperating from the Holland drop in September, they were being prepared for a mission in the projected Rhine crossing. Refitting was incomplete. Many of the officers and men were absent on leave or other duties. It was decided to commit them, however, and they were ordered to close in to assembly areas in the vicinity of Bastogne, Belgium, where a good road net provided routes for movement to threatened spots as the necessity arose. (39)

The 82nd Airborne Division was dispatched first. Enroute to Bastogne its destination was changed to Werbomont since leading elements of the 1SS Panzer Division were moving westward along the Ambleve River toward that town. The 101st Airborne Division, dispatched in the late afternoon of 18 December proceeded to Bastogne. (39)

On 18 December the penetrations were extended. In the zone of the 28th Infantry Division the Reserve Combat Command of the 7th Armored Division which had been committed in an attempt to stem the tide continued withdrawing toward Bastogne. The 110th Regiment, in the zone of the 28th Infantry had been over run. The 112th Regiment was withdrawing toward St. Vith, as was the 424th Infantry Regiment of the 106th Division. The gap now extended from the vicinity of Monschau on the north to Echternach on the south with the exception of the 422nd and 423rd Regiments of the 106th Division which continued to hold out in the Schnee Eifel. (40)

The 1st U. S. Division, which began moving in to extend the 2-99th Division line on Elsenborn Ridge, on 17 December, was in position and repulsed a heavy attack on the 18 December. The 12 SS (38) F p-115 C p 111-112 (39) B p-63 F p 119-120 (40) C p-110

Panzer Division continued its attack to open the gap into the ridge and clear the way for the II SS Panzer Corps which was waiting in an assembly area in the vicinity of Schleiden. (41)

The 1 SS Panzer Division continued westward. Bypassing Malmedy the column continued on to Stavelot. There it forced a crossing over the Ambleve River and continued westward to Trois Ponts. Attempting to cross the Salm River there, the leading elements were stopped by a company of the 51st Engineers Combat Battalion, who blew the bridge. Lacking bridging equipment, the column then turned north, recrossing the Ambleve and headed up the valley on the north side of the river. Finding another bridge to the west across the Ambleve, the column headed west again toward Werbomont. Here again a company of engineers, from the 291st Engineers Combat Battalion delayed his leading tanks and blew another bridge. Turning north again the column was heavily bombed by a flight of P-47's. It halted south of Stavel^{CU}mont for the night. (42)

The 30th Infantry Division was assigned to First Army on the 17th. It began moving into position to extend the line west from Malmedy. The flight of P-47's had reported the location of the 1 SS Panzer Division's leading elements and in order to block their westward movement the 119th Regiment was dispatched in a circling movement to Wer^{CU}bomont and Stavel^{CU}mont. (42)

The line on the north now extended from Butgenbach through Malmedy to Stavelot. A reorganization of First Army now placed V Corps facing south and southeast. VII Corps' boundary was shifted south to include Konzen and to exclude Eupen. V Corps' east boundary ran generally on a line from Malmedy to Verviers. (43)

Attacks continued on the north flank on the 19th. 12 SS Panzer Division moved westward and attacked to the north toward Malmedy. This attack also failed. The Germans now began reinforcing the assaulting corps on the north flank. ^{Re} 2 SS Panzer Division was ordered

(41) C p-107 Situation Map #8 (42) C p 107-110 F p 141-149 (4 3) C p-108

south around St. Vith which was still held by the 7th Armored and attached troops. 9 SS Panzer Division and 15th Panzer Grenadier Divisions were dispatched westward to join the 12 SS Panzer Division on the assault on the north shoulder. 3 Panzer Division reinforced the frontal attack units facing Elsenborn Ridge. (43)

The pattern of the attack now became clear. The commander of the German paratroop unit, Lieutenant Colonel Van Der Heyde, upon surrender had disclosed the plans and confirmed the fact that Antwerp was the objective. The continuing assaults on the north shoulder and flanks were further evidence that the impetus of the attack was to the north. Accordingly, SCHAEF now acted. Third Army postponed its scheduled offensive and prepared to attack to the north on a general direction Bastogne-Cologne. The 11th Armored Division newly arrived on the continent was ordered to the vicinity of Rheims as Theatre reserve. The 17th Airborne Division with several infantry divisions then in England were ordered immediately to the continent. (44)

The Sixth Army Group was to halt its offensives and extend to the left to hold the southern half of Third Army's sector. The 21st Army Group was to place its reserve corps, the XXX, in the Brussels area to meet any thrust across the Meuse. (44)

Meanwhile the two German infantry divisions the 18th and 62nd, plus the Fuehrer Escort Brigade were closing in on St. Vith. The U. S. 7th Armored Division had gone in to position north and east of the town to a point in the St. Vith-Vielsalm highway near Petit Thier. An attack to relieve the two surrounded regiment of the 106th in the Schnee Eifel was halted by the westward pressure of the Germans. GCB, 9th Armored Division extended the line south. 424th and 112th Infantry Regiments were being forced back toward St. Vith. These two regiments by the 19th extended the line south and west to form the U-shaped defense around the city. (45)

(43) C p-108 (44) B p-63 (45) Situation Map #8

By 19 December CCR, 9th Armored Division had been forced back to Longvilly seven miles east of Bastogne. COB, 10th Armored Division, dispatched to Bastogne on the 17th had established road blocks around the town. These two armored units blocked the German attacks giving the 101st Airborne Division time to consolidate its positions. It had closed in to Bastogne during 18-19 December. Originally sent there to attack it was soon to be engulfed in the defense of the city. (46)

A small detachment of engineers and other troops were still holding out in Wiltz. Elements of the 110th Infantry Regiment, 28th Division were still holding out in isolated areas, positions unknown. (47)

The south shoulder continued to hold. CCA, 10th Armored Division was counterattacking in conjunction with elements of the 4th Division. (47)

The 82nd Airborne Division had closed in to an assembly area in the vicinity of Werbomont during the night of 18-19 December. Going into positions in line due south of Werbomont it had moved forward to the Ambleve- Salm Rivers, extending south to Vielsalm. In so doing their left flank along the Ambleve River, together with two battalions of 119th Infantry, 30th Division on the east and south, completed a ring around the leading elements of the 1 SS Panzer Division. In the battle that followed the German tankers abandoned their vehicles and filtered back to the east and rejoined the assault units. (48)

The attack to gain St. Vith, key to the routes leading west still continued. Manteufel had hoped to occupy it on the 17th. He had kept his panzer divisions moving west through the existing gap and kept his infantry assaulting the town. Other than forcing slight withdrawals in the U-shaped defense the attacks had failed. He now reinforced his assault units. Previously the Fuehrer Escort Brigade had been sent around to the north flank and arrived in

(46) C p-108 F p-178 G p-227 (47) C p-110 (48) C p-113

position on 20 December facing the 7th Armored Division on the north flank. On the 21st a coordinated attack was made on the town and the defenders were driven back a short distance west of St. Vith. Losses were heavy and in the forced withdrawal many of the units had lost cohesion. A defense line was hastily established, however, and the Germans, while gaining lateral roads were still denied access to the routes to the west. (49)

Meanwhile at 19 1330 December VIII Corps passed to the control of Third U. S. Army, the boundary re-established on the line St. Vith-Givet. Further changes were forthcoming. At 20 1330 the entire First and Ninth U. S. Armies passed to the control of 21st Army Group. The group boundary as laid down by Schaef ran eastward from Givet to Prum then bent northward to Cologne. (50)

The action was prompted by several influencing factors, the chief being that the First and Third U. S. Armies were out in two, a sixty mile gap existing between them at the base of the penetration. Radio communication was uncertain due to the weather and battle conditions. The Germans were certain to cut the telephone cables. Further, the impetus of the attack was to the north. The Ninth and First U. S. Armies and the Second British Army were all needed to provide adequate security for the vital objectives north of the Meuse River. A commander was needed to coordinate the three. Under the circumstances Montgomery was the logical choice. This action caused a storm of protest. It is still being criticized. However, the criticism seems in most instances rather to be a defense of General Omar H. Bradley, who commanded 12th Army Group. General Bradley needs no defense. (50)

Bastogne was now surrounded and the Germans were assaulting the defenses of the 101st Airborne Division. An important rail and highway center, it was becoming more vital to the success of the attack. Though the city could be bypassed, and German Armor was

(49) C p 112-113 (50) B p-63 (51) C p-114

moving around it to the west it was a considerable handicap. (51)

Third U. S. Army was now preparing to attack to the north from the vicinity of Luxembourg. III Corps, with 80th and 26th Infantry Divisions and the 4th Armored Division was to attack northward astride the Arlon-Liege highway and relieve the 101st Airborne and attached troops in Bastogne. XII Corps, with the 4th and 5th Infantry Divisions plus CCA, 10th Armored Divisions and CCR, 9th Armored Division and the 2nd Cavalry Group was to continue to hold the west bank of the Moselle River in its zone and be prepared to attack to the north on army order. Originally scheduled for 21 December it opened on the 22nd. VIII Corps, now badly disorganized, with 101st Airborne Division, remnants of the 28th Infantry Division, plus CCR, 9th Armored and CCB, 10th Armored Division was to continue the defense of the sector east of the Meuse River. (52)

On the north the XVIII Airborne Corps had become operative on 19 December, assuming control of the 30th, 84th, 106th, Infantry Divisions, 82nd Airborne Division, 3rd Armored Division less CCA, 7th Armored Division, and the 112th Infantry Regiment of the 28th Infantry Division. The Corps Zone now extended west from Malmedy through Stavelot, Stoumont thence south to the vicinity of Viesalm, then west to the vicinity of Marche. (53)

VII Corps was relieved of its zone north of V Corps and on the 22 December was assembling north of Marche, with 2nd Armored Division and the 75th Infantry Division. Its mission was to counterattack and screen right to the Meuse River. (53)

The 422nd and 423rd regiments, 106th Infantry Division, surrounded in the Schnee Eifel on 17 December surrendered on 20 December after a half-hearted attempt to fight their way west to St. Vith. (54)

On the 22nd the 12 SS Panzer joined in an attack against the 7th Armored Division and attached units making a stand west of St. Vith. Already badly shaken from the attack the preceeding day the 7th succeeded in holding. Their position was precarious, however. No

(51) C p-114 (52) E p-117 (53) C p-114 (54) F p-158

resupply had been effected since they entered the salient on the 17th and ammunition was low. By order of Field Marshall Montgomery they were to withdraw. On the morning of the 23rd, a daylight withdrawal was begun, west across the Salm River north of Vielsalm, passing through the lines of the 82nd Airborne Division. Accomplished during heavy German attacks, losses again were heavy.

The American defense lines still denied to the Germans the use of the vital road nets to the north and west in the northern sector. The Sixth Panzer Army making the main thrust had stalled. Failure to attain first the Elsenborn Ridge and then St. Vith, its attack had stalled. Heavy reinforcements to its assaulting divisions had resulted in jammed roads, and many tanks had bogged down in the mud. On the 18 December the crowded roads had provided targets for the American Air Force during the few hours of flying permitted by the weather. The weather from 16-23 December for the most part rendered air support impossible. The Germans had chosen this time to attack because weather forecasts had indicated fog for a period of several days.(55)

The stacking of assault units, one behind the other in the limited road space between the north flank and the St. Vith salient had been a tactical error on the part of Dietrich, the Fifth Panzer Army Commander. After the collapse of the St. Vith salient valuable time was lost clearing the area. (55)

Had Hitler and Model reinforced the Fifth Panzer Army rather than the Sixth the results might have been far different. Manteuffel met his schedule westward until his supply lines gave way. He had kept his Panzer divisions moving west, bypassing Bastogne, leaving its reduction to his infantry divisions with tank support.

Dietrich, however, decided to make another try for routes to the north and west by an attack through the 82nd Airborne Division in the vicinity of Vielsalm. Here the 82nd Airborne Division lines ran from Trois Ponts to Vielsalm then west to a crossroads south of Manhay where it joined with units of the 3rd Armored Division. The

collapse of the St. Vith defense left the 82nd with a salient at Vielsalm. On the 24 December the 2nd Panzer of the Fuehrer Escort Brigade attacked, the 2nd SS Panzer striking at the junction of the 82nd and 3rd Armored, the 9 SS Panzer directly west north of Vielsalm. The 2nd SS Panzer penetrated to Manhay, overrunning elements of the 3rd and 7th Armored Divisions. Fearing that the 82nd Airborne Division's right flank would be turned and provide a gap for the Germans to pour through, and also probably influenced by his desire to "Put on a tidy show" Field Marshall Montgomery ordered the 82nd to higher ground several miles to the west. The line now ran due southeast from Trois Ponts to Manhay. (56)

Mistaking the withdrawal for a retreat the Germans regrouped and attacked again the following day. Though heavy it was broken up after a slight penetration. (56)

This was to be the last heavy attack on the north flank. Unable to gain routes through First Army's lines on the Meuse they now concentrated on the south. On 23 December the weather improved and Allied tactical planes were again in the air. Numerous air strikes were made against tank columns and concentrations as well as supply trains. Their effect began to tell in the reduction of the pressure against the Allied lines. Lack of air support, both reconnaissance and combat aircraft had been a handicap in the early days of the attack. It was to prove invaluable in the reduction of the German salient. (57)

The VII Corps had been placed in the line and the north flank defense now extended from Butgenbach through Malmedy, Trois Ponts, Manhay, Laroohe, Marche to the Meuse at Givet where it joined the British 29th Household Cavalry Regiment. (58)

British units now defended the Meuse River line from Givet to Liege. South of Givet were the 17th Airborne Division, the 11th Armored Division and several battalions of the French Army. (59)

Elements of the 2nd SS Panzer Division had penetrated to

(56) C p-120 (57) C p-118 (58) C Situation Map #10

(59) C p-122 B p-63

Celles, four miles from Dinant on the Meuse, and to Ciney, four miles down the river. The 2nd U. S. Armored Division, with British units had destroyed them on 25-26 December. (59)

The German situation was now precarious. ^{They would} Stopped on the north and faced with the probability of a counter attack at any point on its right flank, ^{they had} lacking sufficient road nets in the center of the area of penetration, and on the south the Third U. S. Army was already advancing northward. The possession of Bastogne, still held by the 101st Airborne and its attached troops was of increasing importance. (60)

Von Rundstedt realized by 24 December that it was impossible to reach the Meuse River. Since the attack had no anchor point in the west the situation in that area was fluid. The German High Command advised withdrawing in order to conserve their slender resources for future defense of the Rhine. Hitler refused to admit defeat and ordered a concentrated attack on Bastogne. Three Volks Grenadier Divisions were added to the Seventh Army to help stop the advancing Third U. S. Army. Panzer division, the 1st, 9th, and 12th with the Fuehrer Escort Brigade were ordered south to Bastogne. (61)

Three division, the 2nd Panzer, the Panzer Lehr and the 26 Volks Grenadier Divisions of 47th Panzer Corps had attacked Bastogne on 20 December after over running the 9th Armored Division elements at Longvilly on the 19th. By this time the 101st Airborne had had time to organize the defenses. With orders only to occupy the town if not strongly held, the Germans had hoped for a quick success. Failing to take it on the 20th, the two panzer divisions passed on west headed for the Meuse River. One regiment of panzers was left behind to assist the infantry in the capture of the town. On the 21st a ring had been formed encircling the defenders and the assaults continued. Resupply was effected by air on 23 December. Though (59) C p-122 B p-63 (60) C p-125 (61) F p-190

the fighting was severe the Germans made no substantial gains. (62)

Hitler now ordered the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division with elements of the 580th Volks Grenadier Division to reinforce the assaulting units. Two additional Volks Grenadier Divisions were added to the Seventh Army to assist in holding off the Third U. S. Army. (62)

The III Corps, Third U. S. Army on 22 December, advanced to a line generally east and west with Mortelange in the center. The XII Corps joined the III Corps on the right, its line extending to Echternach then bending south along the Sauer and Moselle. Air support was provided by XIV Tactical Air Command. (63)

The advance continued against increasingly stubborn resistance and by 25 December the 4th Armored Division was within five miles of Bastogne. On the 26 December it succeeded in forcing a narrow corridor in to the town. Though the Germans battled to cut the corridor the defenders of Bastogne could now be reinforced and supplied. (64)

The heaviest fighting for Bastogne was now to begin. The Fush-rer Escort Brigade, on the 28th made a desperate attack to cut the corridor. This attack failed. By the first of the year the reinforcements from Dietrich's Sixth Panzer Army had joined the assaulting forces around Bastogne. A total of eight divisions were now arrayed around the town, attempting to reduce the salient which extended into their lines of communication. (65)

On the west in the VIII Corps zone the 11th Armored Division, ~~and seen to be~~ joined by the 17th Airborne Division, and 87th Division attacked northeastward in the general direction of Houffalize. General Eisenhower feeling that the Meuse River was no longer in danger of being forced had personally ordered the attack. (66)

The German penetration had reached its deepest point on 24 December when the elements of the 2nd Panzer Division had reached Celles. Though heavy attacks caused the Allied lines to refuse (62 F p 181-182 (63) E p-176 (64) E p-181 (65) E p-216 (66) F p- 197

in some areas the general trend was toward reduction of the German salient.

The Allied lines now formed a solid wall around the penetration. German pressure had eased on the north flank as the First U. S. Army planned its counterattack to open on 3 January 1945. German forward elements, forced by the threats to their flank, withdrew to the east on a general line Marche, Rochefort and St. Hubert. British XXX Corps closed the gap existing between the First and Third U. S. Armies from Rochefort south to the vicinity of Neufchateau. See Map D

The counterattack is beyond the scope of this monograph. But much hard fighting was necessary before the Germans were again driven back to the shelter of the West Wall.

The effects of the offensive are still a much debated question. Some authorities believe it shortened the war by several months since the German reserves dissipated in the attack weakened the defense of the Rhineland and hastened the end. Others believe that it lengthened the war by causing the Allies to regroup to meet the attack and then to redispense to continue the offensive.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

In analysing and criticising this offensive action we find that the Germans, attaining complete surprise, breached the Allied lines over a width of 60 miles and penetrated Allied territory to a similar depth.

A series of errors and miscalculations resulted in the weakness of the Ardennes area into which the Germans attacked. Allied intelligence officers first over estimated the effect of the German defeat in the preceding summer in France. They compounded that error by under estimating the German ability to recover and failed to recognize indications of recovery which were plainly evident. They further failed in properly evaluating and interpreting evidence of the troop movements prior to the offensive which indicated an offensive buildup in the area opposite the Ardennes.

Adolph Hitler was a corporal in the Wehrmacht after four years in World War I. He was not a trained professional soldier yet as head of a totalitarian state he could and did command the German Army. Being untrained his thinking and planning were unorthodox, a fact to which is owed much of the early German successes. This fact was not recognized by the Allied High Command when it was decided to maintain a defense which was little more than a screening force in the Ardennes sector. It is significant that Von Rundstedt and Model, both well trained professional soldiers, objected to the Ardennes attack on the grounds that it was beyond the strength of the available forces. They recommended that the attack be made in the Aachen area in an attempt to eliminate the Allied salient there which contained a heavy troop concentration. This is the area where the Allied Intelligence believed an attack would be made, if the Germans did assume the offensive.

The elaborate and drastic means taken by the Germans to insure surprise was far more successful than they had hoped, and was largely responsible for the initial success. However, had the Allied Intelligence been functioning properly it need not have been so effective. The months of November and December are notorious for poor flying weather, in Europe, and the year 1944 was no exception. This rendered impossible the reconnaissance flights necessary to observe and verify reports from other intelligence sources.

The defense maintained by the U. S. VIII Corps in the Ardennes sector was scarcely more than a screening force. Distances between strong points precluded mutual support, coordinated fire plans and anti-tank defenses. Depth was lacking. The reserves, though mobile were inadequate for the 80 mile sector, therefore it can be said that mobility was lacking. Security was insufficient to guard against surprise. Had patrolling been actively carried on during the 14-15 December the German preparations immediately prior to the attack would have been discovered.

It was not until armor was brought into action against the advancing Germans that the attack began to lose its momentum. Armor must be utilized in the defense to provide the mobility and striking power necessary to combat armor in the offensive.

The Germans committed more troops to the offense in the narrow gap between the St. Vith salient and the north flank than the available roads would accommodate. The resulting jammed highways seriously hampered the attack until after the fall of St. Vith and much valuable time was lost.

The lack of reserves was a handicap to the Allied High Command. With only two divisions available in the Theatre reserve SCHAEF was hard pressed to meet the assault.

The lack of Allied tactical air support in the early days of the offensive reacted favorable to the Germans. Had the weather permitted continued air attacks on the heavy armored concentration in the north corridor on 18-19 December, the results may well have forced the Germans to abandon the attack. German weather forecasts had predicted the weather conditions which existed prior to and during the early days of the attack. It proved a valuable ally.

While the Germans had created a wide gap in the Allied lines, the stand at St. Vith and at Bastogne had the effect of narrowing the gap since they limited the available road space in the penetrated area. The available roads would not support a thrust to the Meuse River. While the German commanders realized this, Hitler did not and ordered the attack continued long after its failure was certain.

LESSONS

Lessons to be gained from a study of this offensive action are listed below:

1. In the calculation of risks consideration should be given to the unorthodox character of the thinking of the enemy high command.
2. It is the function of intelligence to evaluate and interpret.

information and apply it to the tactical situation in terms of capabilities.

3. Surprise is an essential element in a successful attack. Adequate security measures must be undertaken to assure surprise.

4. Defense should be organized in depth.

5. Mutual support must be provided between strong points in defense.

6. A coordinated fire plan is necessary in a properly constructed defense.

7. Coordinated anti-tank defense plans must be formulated.

8. Mobility must be provided by adequate reserves.

9. Security sufficient to guard against surprise must be maintained.

10. Adequate reserves must be maintained by all echelons of command from the platoon to Theatre.

11. Air reconnaissance is necessary in modern warfare.

12. Tactical air support is valuable in defense as well as offense.

13. Armor must be included in the defense to provide the mobility and striking power necessary to combat armor which will be invariably committed in the offense.

14. The number of troops which can be committed in an offensive action is limited by the available road and maneuver space.

15. The width of the base limits the depth of the penetration.